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As happy as a pig in ... a swimming pool with a cold beer

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Never have hogs had it so good. While their less refined cousins root in mud and slurp water, the Kurobuta pigs of Worcestershire quaff premium lager and relax in their private swimming pool.

Every day, the black-bodied, white-nosed pigs on Lucie's Farm, near Worcester, are hand-fed a chilled bottle of beer. Then, three times a week, they swap their grassy field to swim a few lengths of a 25ft pool.

The result, using a breed of hog so British that it was discovered by Oliver Cromwell and praised by Mrs Beeton, is the latest development in the global appetite for the elite delicacies of Japan.

Kobe beef, the butter-textured meat produced from hand-massaged and beer-fed cattle, has already achieved international renown, selling for more than £100 a steak in London restaurants.

But few outside Japan have heard of Kurobuta pork. It is the porcine equivalent of Kobe beef, produced from lovingly tended animals descended, ironically, from Berkshire pigs that were presented in the 19th century to the Empire of the Sun by the British government.

Now a Hawaiian ex-pat living in Britain has gone a step further by producing his own Kurobuta pork using the same cossetting techniques he has perfected to rear his Kobe cattle. Craig Walsh, who was one of the first in Britain to establish a beef herd producing Kobe meat, already has a waiting list for his luxury pork - selling at a wallet-slimming £8 per chop - and has been approached by a Waitrose, about supplying its stores.

In Japan, the Kurobuta (literally "black pig") breed is prized for its fat-marbled pork with a darker colour and deeper flavour than the pallid and lean pork that has become the norm elsewhere.

It commands a premium of more than 80 per cent in Tokyo with a Berkshire piglet worth up to £700, compared to £40 for a non-pedigree animal.

But Mr Walsh, who once co-owned a cheque guarantee firm that he sold for £7m to set up Lucie's Farm with his wife, Margery, has gone a step further by taking pig pampering to new heights after sourcing breeding stock from the UK.

He said: "I heard about Kurobuta and thought we would have to spend a fortune importing embryos from Japan. Then I realised it was a British breed and thought we could improve on the Japanese pigs by using Kobe methods. The pigs are fed on grain and get a half bottle of beer each to improve their appetite.

"We buy premium bottled lager from the supermarkets when it is on special offer. We realised quite soon that pigs don't like being massaged but thought they would like swimming instead. I was worried they wouldn't like the pool but they love it. They swim around quite happily.

"Our philosophy is that if the animals live a happy life then the end product will be that much better. We're very pleased with the result - the meat has a beautiful marbling of fat, great flavour and makes lovely crackling."

Demand for the Kurobuta meat, which comes from discerning "foodie" customers as well as upmarket restaurants, could help secure the future of the Berkshire pig, which is classed as "vulnerable" by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST).

The Berkshire was reputedly first designated a separate breed by Cromwell when his army fed on it during the English Civil War and developed a worldwide reputation for the quality of its meat.

With fewer than 300 breeding sows left in Britain, the RBST is encouraging producers to resurrect the Berkshire's fortunes. A spokeswoman said: "We are very happy to see the Berkshire being turned into a commercial proposition. That is the way to ensure its survival."

Japanese delicacies

*** KOBE BEEF**

Raised according to methods dictated by a lack of open pasture in Japan, Kobe beef comes from cattle raised on a diet of beer and grain and massaged daily to relax muscle tissue. Kobe, which sells for up to £10,000 per carcass, is famed for its thick marbling and buttery texture.

*** FUGU PUFFER FISH**

Renowned not so much for its flavour as the intrinsic danger of eating it. Specialist chefs train for up to 15 years to perfect the removal of the fish's liver, which is so toxic it can kill up to 30 adults. The resulting flesh, costing up to £250 per serving, is revered for its nutritional value, being rich in amino acids.

*** OTORO TUNA**

In the nation that gave the world sushi, there is no finer morsel of raw fish than the upper belly of the southern bluefin tuna. Otoro, part of the stomach wall, is often served in a double helping, costing up to £30, because eating a single slice is considered bad luck. .

*** MATSUTAKE MUSHROOMS**

Have become one of the most expensive fungi on the planet. The knobbly mushrooms, considered an aphrodisiac, were relatively plentiful in Japan 50 years ago but a nematode worm has reduced quantities. It is now imported from Canada to China and costs up to £1,000 per kg.

*** SHOCHU**

Billed as the "new sake", shochu is every bit as ancient as Japan's famous rice wine but was considered outmoded until a recent revival in its fortunes. The grain spirit has gained an international following for its "nutty" flavour. Premium brands cost up to £150 per bottle.

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